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STAT

Moynihan Asserts Press Ignores Peril to Freedom

By JONATHAN FRIENDLY

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan told newspaper publishers yesterday that they had failed to publicize actions by the Reagan Administration and Congress that he said jeopardized constitutional protections for freedom of speech.

The Senator, a New York Democrat, said that "there is a truly menacing atmosphere gathering in Washington" but that news organizations had not reported it and that their owners had not lobbied against it.

He cited the passage last year of a law that makes it a crime to publish the name of a covert intelligence agent, even when the name is taken from publicly available documents. He also cited the Administration's efforts to stop leaks of what it says is sensitive information.

Senator Moynihan was applauded by more than 2,000 publishers and their guests, who are meeting in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel for the 97th annual convention of the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

In interviews after his speech, several publishers said the organization had worked against the agent-identification legislation but agreed that they could do more to focus public attention on actions that they said threatened First Amendment freedoms.

"I've been saying the same thing for years," said Otis Chandler, chairman of the board of the Times Mirror Company, which owns, among other newspapers, The Los Angeles Times, Newsday and The Denver Post. He said the newspapers carried articles about such developments "but it gets pushed off the front page by harder news."

"It is hard to get publishers excited unless they see the clear and immediate danger," agreed Allen H. Neuharth, the president of the Gannett Company, the nation's largest newspaper chain.

K. Prescott Low, the publisher of The Patriot Ledger in Quincy, Mass., noted that the A.N.P.A.'s government affairs committee had lobbied against the agent-identity law and against proposals to change the Freedom of Information Act.

He said that no single Administration action had compelled overwhelming press attention but that "if you put the montage together, you see a clear pattern that should be of very great concern to newspaper publishers and editors."

Senator Moynihan said the First Amendment was threatened last year by a bill to strip the Supreme Court of power to review state court decisions on prayer in schools. But he said there was little news coverage of the Senate filibuster that stopped that proposal or of the constitutional issues at stake.

He also urged the publishers to fight a Presidential directive that says Government officials who have had access to secret documents must get Government approval for books and articles they write after they leave office.

"The effect of the new Presidential directive could well be to strike at the heart of the ability of the public to be informed about their Government," the Senator said.

The publishers heard a defense of Administration economic and regulatory policies from Transportation Secretary Elizabeth H. Dole and from Senator Bob Dole, Republican of Kansas.

Secretary Dole asked the publishers to help focus public attention on the problem of drunken driving.

Senator Dole said recent statistics proved that the economy was beginning to grow again.

The publishers attended workshops on such industry problems as circulation, advertising and technology. In one session, officers of The Associated Press defended a 9.5 percent price increase and said they were still working on a new system for apportioning the costs of the operation.

Over the weekend, the association's board of directors said it would support efforts by television broadcasters and others to repeal Federal regulations that they say regulate television news programs. The board said it would lobby in Congress and would join lawsuits to overturn the "equal time" and "fairness doctrine."

The fairness doctrine says broadcasters must provide a balanced presentation of controversial issues. Under other rules, candidates are guaranteed equal time to respond to the broadcast statements by political opponents.

Historically, newspapers have been at economic odds with broadcasters, but most of the major newspaper companies now also own television and cable television systems that must adhere to the Federal broadcast rules.

The board had previously said it opposed the rules but had not indicated steps it would take to change them.

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